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LENGTH OF THE TRADE LIFE IN THE GLASS BOTTLE INDUSTRY

By DENIS A. HAYES,

President of the Glass Bottle Blowers' Association of America.

The subject assigned me is "The Length of the Trade Life Among Glass Bottle Blowers," a question on which I have no exact data, but from information at hand it is safe to say that the man blowing glass bottles to-day at the age of fifty-five years or over is the exception and one that is each year becoming more rare. This is a strange statement to make, because there are no just or logical reasons why worthy and willing men should not be allowed to work at their trade as long as they desire, or as long as necessity compels them to do so. Few indeed are the workmen in our craft, or any other for that matter, who make enough wages to retire with a competency at the approach of old age or the enforced expiration of their trade life.

It has been the common belief for years that glass blowing is an unhealthy occupation. Some insurance companies discriminate against the workers in this industry, but their action is based more upon suspicion than facts, because I doubt if glass blowing, so far as the work itself is concerned, is any more injurious than many other indoor occupations. There are, however, conditions which surround the work that are a menace to health and long life, but these unfavorable conditions can be and are being removed. The worst of them is child labor.

The trade requires speed, great skill and precision in workmanship. Nearly all blowers have been compelled to start work as early as nine and ten years of age. They serve as tending boys three or four years before being indentured as apprentices for a term of five years; during this latter time they receive but 50 per cent. of the wages earned by the journeymen. Owing to modern improvements in the manufacture of glass and equipment of factories, an appren-

tice now in his first and second years can produce as much ware and of as good quality on many lines as a journeyman, but owing to the low wages at which boys work during the periods mentioned, employers still insist on a five-year term. This and the old belief that boys have to start work at an early age in order to learn the trade are to-day exploded theories. Nevertheless, every effort made by our organization to increase the age at which boys should be allowed to work is opposed by the average employer.

There are three sets of boys employed in glass bottle factories doing different kinds of work, generally of a light nature but requiring activity. There is no reason whatever why any of them should be under sixteen years old. A law of this kind has proven to be practical in States where this age is the limit, below which children cannot go to work, especially in Illinois, where the glass bottle industry has not suffered in the least as a result of such law.

Glass blowing is hot work, and owing to the heat no bottles are made during the months of July and August, but in May, June and September it often becomes so warm that men cannot work longer than a half hour at a time; then they are compelled to rush into the open air to prevent prostration. In factories with low roofs and insufficient ventilation men are often forced to stop work every twenty minutes, and in many factories they perspire freely even during the winter.

The sudden changes in temperature experienced by men in this condition may be resisted while youth and vigor remain, but, owing to the early age at which they go to work, their strength and vitality are not given a chance to fully develop or are almost entirely destroyed at an age when other men are entering the prime of life. Being deprived of schooling, they can have very little knowledge of hygienic rules or laws, hence do not sufficiently know how to protect themselves against the conditions here described. The result is that early in life they become victims of rheumatism, catarrh, throat troubles and tuberculosis. The latter disease especially is most dreaded by our members.

Glass blowers do their best work between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. The records of our insurance department show that most deaths occur between the ages of forty and fifty. This would not be the case, either in regard to disease or death, if children were not allowed to go to work until after sixteen years of age, and

not then unless they had received sufficient training and education to enable them to know the value of health and grow as their Creator intended they should.

This can be accomplished without loss to the employer or increase in price of ware to the consumer, for, as a result of the highly developed skill of the workmen, the greater production and the improved methods of manufacture, bottles sell to-day for less than one-half the price paid ten years ago; but when it comes to the health and life of boys and men such things as prices should not be considered. Yet it is to be regretted that in every effort made by trades unions to keep children out of factories, or better the conditions of those who are compelled to work under dangerous or unsanitary conditions, we are usually met by such talk as competition, increased cost of production or the danger of reduced profits. This is a short-sighted policy, and would seem to imply that the dollar is of more consequence than the life or health of employees.

I have no desire to attribute all the ills of our craft to child labor; still it requires no argument to prove that it is wrong, both from a moral and humane point of view. Were it not for the exhaustion experienced by men whose vitality has been reduced, or never fully developed, as a consequence of their being put to work in certain industries when they should be at school, there would be far less intemperance, because men would not have to seek stimulants to give a false sense of recuperation or make them feel as they otherwise would if only in an ordinary condition of health.

Piece work prevails in the trade. Each year the production of the individual workman becomes greater. The highest day's work of this season becomes the standard for the next. A man working according to present-day methods can make three times as many bottles in a day of eight and a half hours as he did twenty years ago in a day of ten hours, but the expenditure of strength and energy is now much greater than it was then. Thus the exhaustion consequent upon working with speed and regularity at a hot furnace is another good reason why boys should be kept out of glass factories until they are of the age previously mentioned. Not only this, but the hours of labor should be still further reduced, so that men would, after leaving their work, retain sufficient mental and physical vigor for recreation, study and social intercourse.

The working time in the bottle trade is eight and a half hours
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on both day and night shifts; these alternate every other week. During recent years our efforts have been centred mainly upon reducing the hours of labor and agitating to increase the age at which children could work. In both of which we have in a large measure succeeded. To-day we regard these things as of more importance than an increase in wages. Formerly the night shift finished the week by starting at five o'clock Saturday evening and working until midnight. We have had this stopped, and now boys on this turn are done at three o'clock Saturday morning.

These, with other children who are now working in the mills and factories, will help make up the workmen and citizens of the future, and doubtless have greater responsibilities and problems to meet than those of the present day. The glass bottle blowers, with other trade unions, will therefore strive as never before to see that these children are properly trained and educated to meet whatever duties may fall to their lot, and be given opportunities which we, as workmen, were denied.

Organized labor is doing much good. More so than its critics or opponents give it credit for, and, notwithstanding adverse circumstances, we are hopeful and are looking forward to the time when the "crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places plain."